

Capitol Punishment . . . By Art Buchwald

Categorically Denied

ONE OF THE most important jobs in the Government today is to deny a story that has been printed in the press or announced on the radio.

The Special Assistant for Denials in the Johnson Administration is a wispy little man named John J. Categorically, who has an office deep in the bowels of the White House, where he may put out as many as 20 denials in one day.

When I found Mr. Categorically, he was just finishing up a denial on a new American military policy. Dictating into a machine, he said, "The United States denies that there has been any shift in its policy on the use of American troops in South Viet-Nam. American commanders have always had the right to use American troops in combat providing the South Vietnamese forces request them. This is a recorded announcement."

He put down the microphone and said to me, "What can I do for you?"

"SIR, THE American people are used to every sort of a denial under the Johnson Administration, but nobody knows how your de-



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partment works. Could you explain it?

"Well, every morning all the staff members have a meeting and we decide what we're going to announce that day. Then while somebody is working on the announcement I am working on the denial."

"Simultaneously?" I asked.

"Of course. It would be very dangerous to issue a statement without a denial backing it up. The press would never believe us. Let me give you an example.

"Last week, Gen. Maxwell Taylor, our Ambassador to South Viet-Nam, came back to the United States for a meeting with the President. The White House made the announcement, and then I drafted a denial that he had returned for any special reason. As soon as the denial was put out, the newspapers realized something important was up, and the story got a much better play."

"The denial was the key," I said in amazement.

"Exactly."

"DO YOU ALWAYS wait for an announcement before you deny something?"

"Not necessarily. Sometimes we feel it's better to deny an action just before we do it, more or less to prepare the people for it. For example, if we are going to send a division of Marines into Viet-Nam, I will first prepare a denial that such plans are in the works."

"But what happens when you do send in a Marine division?"

"Then we deny that we ever denied we said we weren't going to send them. Sometimes the Pentagon will deny a White House story and sometimes the State Department will deny a Pentagon story. In this

way, we're always covered."

"Aren't there ever any slip-ups?"

"In an operation this big there have to be," he replied. "We had a heck of a time in the Dominican Republic. First, we had to deny we were supporting either side in the revolution. Then we had to deny we were supporting the rebels.

"Then we had to deny we were supporting the military junta. Then we had to deny we were violating the OAS treaty. Ambassador Adlai E. Stevenson was on the phone to me 14 times a day."

"It sounds like a tough business," I said.

"I don't mind it," he said.

JUST THEN A red phone rang and Mr. Categorically picked it up.

He took a pencil and started writing. "Yes, sir, you want to issue a denial that you are annoyed with critics of your foreign policy. I got it. You welcome differences of opinion. Even from college professors. No, sir, it's no problem. I'll have it ready for you in a half-hour."

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